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Publication date:
2015

Citation for published version (APA):
Lauterbach, K. (2015). *Governing Compassion: Religion and the Politics of Assisting Refugees in Urban Space*. Paper presented at African Studies Association, 58th Annual Meeting, San Diego, United States.

African Studies Association, 58th Annual Meeting
19-22 November 2015, San Diego

**Governing Compassion: Religion and
the Politics of Assisting Refugees in Urban Space**

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Abstract:

This paper offers an analysis of how religious institutions provide material and spiritual assistance to urban refugees and the processes of governance this entails. It looks at the underlying religious and ideological principles that guide the ways in which churches provide and regulate access to assistance and how assistance is made sense of by relating to religious categories such as compassion. For displaced people the urban context is characterised by high mobility and transitoriness, which is reflected in how relations of governance and authority are constructed. Although there are attempts to formalise and bureaucratised the provision of assistance, there is also a tendency of the religious organisations withdrawing from engagement with other institutional actors and hence to maintain relations of exchange, loyalty and recognition mainly within a religious setting and drawing on a religious language. The empirical focus of the paper is Congolese churches in Kampala, Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

Shekinah Eagle Centre Church is a small Congolese congregation located in Nsambya, Kampala in Uganda. The church was founded by a Congolese man (Apostle Jonnahs), who lived in Kampala, but later moved to Canada. In 2012, Pastor Mary Jeanne, assisted by Pastor Espérance and Pastor Caleb, headed the church. The church had a reputation in town of helping refugees; pastors and church members had been providing shelter, food, counselling and assistance with the process of registering as a refugee in Uganda. At the same time the membership of the church was declining. Five years back the church had around 300 members and in January 2013 they were only somewhere between 25 and 40 members. The church had moved premise three times within the year 2012. They had tried to set up a project with the aim of providing more help to their members, but it failed and people moved to other churches. Some also got resettlement abroad through the UNHCR and some went back to DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo).

A young man, Daniel, was a member of the church in early 2012. He initially became a church member because he had been offered to live with a man who came to Shekinah. Daniel left the man's house after some months and later also the church. He had fallen sick and had received no help from the church. He had received money and medicine from some Ugandan neighbours, but nothing from the church. He was very disappointed with the pastors. He said:

“When you are there in church you are seen as an important person, when you work you are an important person, but when you are not there, [when] you fall sick or have a problem, then, then it is *l'article 15*¹, when you get well again and

¹ *L'article 15* is a Congolese expression meaning '*débrouillez vous*' (look after yourself). It refers to an imaginary article of the constitution and signifies “an implicit social pact between the state and its citizens since it allowed the former to retire from

you go to church, they see you again, you are an important man. But that is not good, the love of God, I did not find that in the church. If you get sick they abandon you”.

Daniel left the church and was of the impression that the pastors did not help him because he was young, unemployed and had no money. Some church members continued to call him from time to time and he still considered them as his ‘Christian family’. He started going to another church, which was the church of the man with whom he stayed. He saw it as his obligation to do so.

Elisa is another member of Shekinah Eagle Centre Church. She came from Goma to Kampala in 2010 and stayed in one pastor’s house. Later another family arrived and the pastor left the house so the new family could live there. The landowner was a Ugandan woman who lived in the US. They could not manage to pay the monthly rent, but as long as they paid a symbolic amount of money it was accepted. In December 2012 Elisa was attacked by a man on a motorbike while she was walking in the street. She fell down in the ditch. She was taken to hospital and was treated for a broken arm with a double fracture. She contacted a family member and the head pastor of the church, who came to visit her at the hospital and paid for the expenses with money from the church. Elisa had to reimburse the money when it became capable for her to do so. A woman from the church came to Elisa’s house every day to assist her with the daily work and to look after her children. Elisa also contacted the police, who started to investigate the case and gave her a phone number so she could call them if she was attacked again. She furthermore contacted the UNHCR for assistance with paying for x-rays, medicine, and her rent, but they declined due to lack of funds. In 2011 her application for resettlement to a third country was rejected by the

public life and from its functions, leaving to the latter the possibility to act unlawfully, in a context where the difference between legality and illegality had no more sense ...” (Jourdan 2004: 170).

UNHCR. After the attack she re-submitted her application containing the new information on her personal security. The information was verified by the agency, but her plaster had to be opened twice to check if the fractures were real.

□

This paper² offers a discussion of religious institutions as providers of material and spiritual assistance in contexts of mobility and displacement. I discuss the types of assistance these institutions offer, the social and economic relationships they entail, and relate this to the underlying religious and ideological principles that guide these practices and through which they are understood. I am interested in exploring how we can understand the idioms Daniel draws on when referring to *l'article 15* as well as to the 'love of God' as a way to explain why he was disappointed that the church did not assist him (or 'see' him)? How can we make sense of the assistance that Elisa received from Pastor Mary Jeanne? Is it a form of charity and an expression of compassion or is it (also) an expression of a non-state actor that provides assistance in a displacement context, where others do not offer much assistance?

The aim is to analyse the particularities of religious organisations as providers of assistance as a way to expand our knowledge of the plural field of non-state actors. In this regard, I wish to emphasise the necessity to include the particular normative frameworks that these draw upon in order to get a fuller comprehension of this plural field of social and political actors. I argue that we cannot only understand the services churches provide in the same framework in which we understand how local bureaucracies or the state work, and all too

² This paper is part of a postdoctoral project financed by the Danish Council of Independent Research | Social Sciences (2011-2014). It is based on fieldwork carried out in Kampala, Uganda in January-March 2012 and in January 2013. I conducted a little more than 80 interviews with Congolese pastors, church members, who had for the most part come to Uganda because of the unrest in DRC. I also interviewed people from NGOs working with urban refugees and refugee associations. I concentrated most of my time on two Congolese congregations; one located in the Katwe area on Kampala and the other in the Nsambya area of Kampala. Both areas can be characterised as containing slum dwellings where many refugees live in small houses. Katwe is, however, also known as being a thriving district with a high number of local enterprises. Due to the high mobility of both churches and people I also followed some people who had been moving to other areas of the city and/or had changed church.

often religious organisations get classified in the same rubric as NGOs and other community-based associations. In order to understand the public and political role of religious organisations, we need to see them both within their religious normative framework and to add this perspective to an analysis of these as non-state actors.

Moreover, in this particular urban context, there is an intersection between religion and humanitarian institutions. Personal as well as institutional narratives within the religious field draw on religious ideas such as compassion, grace and gratitude. At the same time, people engage with another institutional language that is connected to the humanitarian field. This implies that the ways in which assistance is provided and regulated is guided and made sense of in relation to this dual register of overlapping and yet different institutional languages and related norms.

The paper addresses the question of how we can understand the institutions refugees meet in their everyday lives, how religious institutions govern access to their services and according to what norms and criteria. Assistance in the above vignettes emerges as provision of social services, reciprocal gift-giving, as well as gifts of grace and gratitude. Consequently, we are induced to reflect on religious institutions not as isolated institutions, but as part of broader institutional landscapes. How do religious institutions meet other institutions (such as the state, international agencies and NGOs) and what happens in these encounters? And what are the implications with regard to the authority and legitimacy of these institutions, and related processes of recognition and political subjectification (Fraser 2000, Krause and Schramm 2011)?

Academic debates on the provision and regulation of social services in contexts of political and economic crises have drawn our attention to the broad spectrum of actors and institutions that co-produce, co-exist, substitute, supplement or challenge one another when

providing services (Blundo and Le Meur 2009, Goodfellow and Lindemann 2013, Joshi and Moore 2004, Raeymaekers *et al* 2008). This has led to a focus on non-state actors that take on state like functions (e.g. policing, tax collection, service provision), and has led to wider implications in terms of how we think of authority and rights (Lund 2013).

The literature on displacement and religion (and on development and religion more generally) also focuses on the role of, for example churches as service providers (often employing the term Faith Based Organisations/FBOs). I, however, find both the terminology and the approach too narrow. It creates an artificial boundary between the institution and the receiver of assistance that ignores how these constitute each other. Moreover, terms like social services and social security also carry a certain ideological baggage and reflect a certain understanding of the relation between state, institutions and citizens.³ Questions of access to resources, identity, and belonging are knit together with questions of giving and receiving: who we are, what we have and what we give and receive. In this particular case, these questions have to be analysed in taken the religious ideological framing into consideration.

The article starts by introducing the context in which Congolese churches in Kampala, Uganda operate. It then discusses the double institutional landscape they navigate in and continues with mapping out the variety of assistance churches provide and how it is made sense of. I then go on to discuss the norms and criteria that assistance is given according to. The article argues that (at least) two sets of norms are drawn upon: 1) religious (Christian) ideas of being needy/worthy, ideas of the 'pure gift' and compassion; and 2)

³ The initial idea of my research was to study religious institutions as providers of social services in contexts where services provided by the state and other formal systems were absent. However, I came to realize that churches and their members do not perceive the help and commodities they exchange as a form of social service. It is perceived according to a different register. However, when religious institutions engage with other institutions in a displacement context, they do adopt certain registers of operation and understanding from each other and it is in this encounter we can tease out overlapping understandings and practices of giving assistance, giving gifts, and showing gratitude.

ideas that reflect a more bureaucratized understanding of rights and entitlements related to the status of being a refugee that the churches adopt from other institutions.

CONTEXT: CRISES, DISPLACEMENT AND RELIGION

Since the overthrow of President Mobutu in 1996 and the ensuing unrest and conflicts a large number of Congolese have come to Uganda and other neighbouring countries to seek refuge. More recently, post-election violence (December 2011) and the continuing conflicts in the Kivus have resulted in a growing number of Congolese crossing the border to Uganda. In its 2013 country operations profile for Uganda, the UNHCR estimated that approximately 190,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers are in Uganda, of which 120,000 are from the DRC. 48,000 of the 190,000 refugees are considered to live in urban areas mainly in Kampala (UNHCR, 2013). The most recent influxes of Congolese refugees in 2012 and 2013 were linked to the creation in Eastern Congo of the rebel movement M23.

The official policy of the government of Uganda⁴ has until recently been that all refugees should reside in refugee settlements (Bernstein 2005: 7; Lammers 2006). These settlements are located in rural areas, mainly in the north-western and western parts of the country. Refugees are allocated plots of land for agricultural activities, and the long-term aim is that they should become self-reliant. This policy reflected the view that refugees should be in the country only on a temporary basis and that they should be controlled and surveyed. However, it has been unofficially accepted that refugees live outside settlements if they are self-sufficient and can document this (Bernstein 2005), although they would have no rights to receiving assistance (Russell 2011: 295). With the passing of the Uganda Refugees Act by parliament in 2006, the legal rights of refugees to move,

⁴ Based on the Control of Alien Refugees Act from 1960.

live and work outside settlements were acknowledged. Still, the provision of assistance has largely been restricted to those living in settlements (World Refugee Survey 2009).

A growing number of refugees are settling in Kampala and other urban areas (Omata 2012). Most refugees with whom I spoke had come directly to Kampala without passing through a camp.

People come to Kampala rather than the camps for the better livelihood opportunities and better access to health and educational services. In addition, the refugee settlements are located close to the border with the DRC, which poses a security risk. For example, refugees living in settlements have been recruited to rebel groups operating in Rwanda and the DRC (Bernstein 2005; Murison 2002). Upon arrival in Kampala, they ask for the Congolese community or a Congolese church; many are referred to the Congolese churches that are known for helping refugees. Most refugees rent small rooms in the slum areas of Kampala (e.g., Katwe, Kisenyi, and Nsambya) if they can afford it. Some live in the streets or sleep outside at the premises of Old Kampala Police Station, where refugees register (Lammers 2006). Many refugees also find shelter in churches or in pastors' homes.

Access to social services and humanitarian assistance is formally regulated by people's status (e.g. as asylum seeker, refugee or national citizen) and by physical location (e.g. in settlements/camps or urban areas). Urban refugees do not have access to assistance (food, shelter) and have to be self-reliant, which in practical terms means that they depend on social networks, family, friends and help from churches and small urban refugee associations. Urban refugees do in principle have access to the same basic social services as Ugandan citizens (basic education and health services), but due to a number of barriers (language, discrimination, lack of economic resources to pay fees, etc.) these services are often not accessible. Some assistance is provided by the UNHCR and a number of NGOs, like medicine, counselling for rape victims, micro-credit loans and workshops on refugees' rights.

However, it was unclear to many refugees who was entitled to this assistance and on what terms.

The difficulties refugees have making a living reflect the more general deteriorating living conditions in Kampala. Goodfellow (2010) argues that Kampala is in a situation of profound institutional crises (caused by a conflict between the national government and the city council, which is held by the opposition party), as reflected in the government's inability to address the growing problems of unemployment, inadequate housing, and conflicts over land. This has resulted in demonstrations in 2009 and again in spring 2011 (the walk-to-work campaigns). However, certain obstacles are specific to the situation of refugees and non-citizens. Language and the translation of documents like diplomas pose a barrier to finding a job in the formal sector. In Kampala, Luganda and English are spoken by most, whereas Congolese mainly speak Lingala, Swahili and/or French. The majority of the refugees hope to be resettled by the UNHCR and move to a Western country. Therefore some hesitate to invest in a new life in Kampala or to receive micro-credit loans as they understand their participation as a symbol of being tied to that specific physical place.

There is a growing community of Congolese churches in Kampala, Uganda, of which many pastors and members have refugee status⁵, but some are also students, business people etc. Most churches are registered with the Congolese Christian Community, which is an umbrella association for Congolese churches in Uganda. According to the current president there are around 50 member churches. The churches are of a Pentecostal/charismatic orientation and have been established within the last decade or so by Congolese people who came to Uganda because of the conflicts in the DRC.

⁵ The term refugee is problematic to use for several reasons. First, it is a juridical categorisation that refers to an international convention and hence to people's formal status in a country that is not their country of origin. Second, it reflects a form of politics labelling in which objects of policy concern are created and through which domination is exercised (Zetter 1991, 2007).

The churches differ in size, doctrinal orientation, history, identity and in the composition of their membership. However, most are of a Pentecostal or Evangelical orientation. The number of churches is increasing due to both the continuing incoming of Congolese refugees and the splitting up of already existing churches. Most, but not all, churches would identify themselves as refugee churches—an identification that was also explained as a barrier for having a stable and growing church because of the high degree of mobility among members and because people did not have any income and therefore could not contribute to the work of the church or the income of the pastors.

INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPES

Congolese churches provide access to a vast range of resources such as food, housing, clothes, counselling, money, and access to networks, as well as spiritual services such as prayers and deliverance. The churches take part in two different institutional landscapes with different ideological framings. On the one hand they are part of the religious landscape in Kampala (and part of wider religious networks with links to DRC and places where refugees are resettled to, e.g. Canada). On the other hand they are part of and interacting with a humanitarian institutional landscape that assist, control, label, and manage refugees; namely that of humanitarian organisations, NGOs and the state. These institutions either have a formal responsibility and/or have ideological motivations for their involvement.

The churches I studied in Kampala relate (to different degrees) to this double normative framework when they engage in relations of giving assistance. On the one hand, they justify and legitimate their actions of helping others through religious idioms. On the other hand, they also set up institutional practices that reflect and adapt the practices of humanitarian

organisations and NGOs, e.g. make rules, formalise assistance, bureaucratised their practices. In this way, ‘refugee’ churches navigate two registers of norms and practices and relate to their members in both ways. This has implications for how relationships between church leaders and church members are established, but also for how church leaders seek to build up their legitimacy. It furthermore affects the link between these institutions and other more formal institutions. This plurality of institutional attachments and relationships is important to keep in mind when studying refugee churches through the lens of political subjectivity. We need not only understand the relationship between a pastor and church members, but also how other institutional norms and practices influence “how individuals or groups gain a position which makes them recognizable as such” (Krause and Schramm 2011: 127). It is about being recognised as well as being addressed as subjects in the sense that the labels and categories that are employed, is both a form of domination, but also becomes part of people’s self-identification and social practices (Zetter 1991, 2007). Consequently, the field that I analyse is both informed by religious oriented norms and more bureaucratised and policy oriented norms and this has implications for how access to assistance is regulated.

FORMS OF ASSISTANCE

Alice came to Kampala in late December 2012. She came with one of her children, two cousins and her husband from Goma in the North Kivu province. She left her second child in Goma with a friend. They crossed the border to Uganda at Bunagana after having spent some days in the mountains and went directly to Kampala. Alice explained that she had been living a good life in Goma, and therefore would not want to go to a camp. In Kampala, they went first to register with the police and the OPM [Office of Prime Minister]. They were told to come back after two weeks to get the asylum seeker status. The next thing they did was to look for a church in Kampala and

they found a Ugandan church in Katwe. The head pastor was travelling and they could not get help so they were taken to a Congolese church a bit further down the road. Here they were welcomed by the head pastor, who invited them to stay in church as they were Congolese brothers. They sleep in the church on small mattresses and get food from the pastor and some church members. During the day they gather their belongings in a corner of the church and sit outside. Alice recounted her story and background to the pastor. She is a film-maker and singer and the pastor told her that she was free to show her talent in church.⁶

The case of Alice and her family is a common story of how Congolese get assistance from the religious communities when arriving in Kampala. What is interesting in her way of telling how they were received is that they are both received as people in need of help, but also as people who have certain talents to perform in church and thereby engage in social relationships. This is one of the differences with regard to other institutional platforms where refugees seek and receive assistance as alluded to in the above section.

When new refugees or asylum seekers come to Kampala they ask for a Congolese pastor or church and this is often their first point of contact. Some time they have a phone number of a pastor that they contact upon arrival. At the same time, they register with the police and the OPM. Some are then assisted directly by the church (e.g. by being allocated a place in church to sleep) and also by church members (e.g. by offering food, clothes etc.). The churches function both as providers of assistance themselves, but also as mediators of services either from fellow church members or the more official system (UNHCR and NGOs). In relation to the latter the churches offer guidance on how to approach the system and at times also act as entry points to the system as some church leaders act as community leaders and represent the Congolese community vis-à-vis for instance the UNHCR.

⁶ Fieldnotes 4 January 2013.

Broadly speaking the material assistance provided by churches can be divided into two overall categories: 1) immediate assistance (food, medicine, shelter) and 2) assistance that is more investment oriented (e.g. for business activities, education, renting a house, family support, funerals).

In term of immediate assistance churches first and foremost provide shelter. People would stay in church or in other church members' houses. Some people stay in the church for some months and then move on to small rented rooms or houses. Other with less economic means stay in the churches for up to two years. In Shekinah Eagle Centre Church, mentioned in the beginning of this article, they had invested in mattresses, sheet, and cooking utensils. They had had up to six families living in the church. Later on, however, the church had moved to another premise and was no more capable of hosting people in the church. Newcomers would now be invited to stay with other church members, or the pastors would share their homes. One pastor had changed house three times within a year to make room for newly arrived refugees. But some would also be referred to the camps if there were no other possibilities, as was the case with two teenage sisters who upon arrival in Kampala contacted a pastor, but there were no spaces available. In some cases, the pastors would help with paying the first months' rent of a house. The churches and pastors would also provide people with a small amount of money to get started with some petty trading. Many churches also offer English courses to their members and others who can pay the small fee.

The churches also provide an institutional space where people can assist each other (through collective collections of money, food, accommodation with fellow church members etc.).

Either this could happen in smaller groups (e.g. women's department) or the pastors could announce if someone had a special need and organise a collection. The church would organise home visits in case of birth and collect money for buying sugar, soap and food for the family.

In the case of death, the churches helped to either repatriate the body to the DRC or with burial in Uganda. At the individual level some church members were assisted directly by a pastor (e.g. helping with paying rent, or finding a sponsor to pay for children's education) if there was a close connection between the two. This was seen as a form of sponsorship and did not involve the church as such.

The churches and pastors moreover act as mediators to the official system. Some pastors were representing the Congolese community in the meetings of the UNHCR and in this way served as direct entry points to those (lawyers and counsellors) taking decisions and handling the files of refugees. More concretely, pastors would guide people on how to fill in their forms (which has to be done in English), on where to go, who to talk to and how to present their case. The services rendered by the churches were seen as more accessible, less bureaucratised and less formalised as compared to NGOs.

In addition to material assistance, the churches and pastors also provide spiritual assistance. At the spiritual level pastors assist people by offering prayers, by deliverance sessions and by anointing (with oil). This can be related to listening to their displacement experiences, counselling them on how to overcome rape of a partner and finding hope for their future lives. A number of pastors explained that when they had nothing else to offer they could always pray for people, but also that people would often get disappointed and move on to a new church, cf. the discussion on expectations and institutional landscapes above. One pastor explained : 'If you help one refugee by providing food or financial help this has a **higher value** to the refugee whom you are counselling because he is expecting much more than counselling from you ... Some go away because we have stopped giving help. Those who remain, remain because they feel the word of God is a help to them. Those who left had come

for the benefits and when the benefits stopped they left' (Interview, pastor Shekinah Eagle centre church, date).

CRITERIA AND DECISION-MAKING: COMPASSION, SPIRITUAL MATURITY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

One category of assistance is for people “in dire need” and not necessarily reserved for church members. But who are the deserving poor? According to pastors, they could discern those in need by observing for instance, who would come to church without wearing shoes. Those with basic needs were talked about as being in priority and could not be refused. This was talked about as a Christian obligation and as a special obligation of pastors. When explaining this, the Bible was often referred to and it was seen as a form of Christian *grund* norm.

There is also the understanding that the church cannot refuse someone who comes to church in need of help. This is explained by being ‘the words of God’; you have to help someone in need. So if a stranger comes to the church and asks for help, they seek out the possibilities, but also based on a judgement of whether the person is talking the truth.⁷ The pastor says that they only refuse in rare cases and if they do, then they refuse “*avec sagesse*”. Another person explained this norm of non-refusal as being thought of as a ‘postponement’ of help, in case the church or the church leaders did not have the resources.

A variation of the obligation to help people in need was explained through the idea of compassion. One pastor talked about how a lady he knew felt sorrow for him and therefore

⁷ As I am dealing with the norms here it is important also to note that this is not necessarily how giving help is done in practice. People would complain about the pastors not helping them enough or it would create jealousy if one family was helped and not another. Also there was a tendency (at least in one of the churches) that the head pastor would help people he knew from his home town on an individual basis. He would pay visits at home and see if they were in need of food or money. This group of people was seen as the core and most loyal group of the church and they were also taking up the positions of responsibility in church (such as elders, cashier, deacons etc.).

helped him (*elle a eu pitié de moi*). This was a common way of explaining why unknown people (or Ugandans) would help them, both helping them coming to Kampala, but also helping them with food and for instance accepting delay in the paying of rent (cf. the case of Elisa mentioned in the introductory vignette) (Lauterbach 2014b).

One way to distinguish different forms of help was in terms of how widely and in what ways the church and church leaders needed to become involved, as this also says something about the scale and importance of the request or need. One pastor formulated it this way:

“We have many cases where we handle it between the pastor and the believer [*fidèle*]. There are also cases where we call the elders and I explain the case. If there is possibility we help directly. There are also situations where we cannot limit ourselves to pastors and elders. We inform the church and we make an appeal of offering. Like if happened with the president of ‘papas’ [men’s group in church]. He was a refugee. His wife was with us. They had a child. He [the president] fell sick and was sick for three months before he died. He was at Mengo hospital [private not for profit hospital]. He didn’t get any assistance. HCR [UNHCR] didn’t pay because he had to be at Mulago [national referral hospital]. So instead of leaving him like that we did a collection in church. So we helped, first with paying for the scans. Then the days he was leaving Mengo to go to Mulago, the church collected and gave its part. And the wife also gave her part. There we informed the church directly and informed them about the situation in which the father was”⁸

⁸ Interview with pastor [*pasteur responsable*], 7 February 2012, Kampala

The pastor distinguishes three different ways in which help is handled and regulated: 1. an issue that is handled between a pastor and a church member, 2. a case where the church leaders and elders are involved and 3. a case where the entire church gets involved. This depends on the size of the assistance involved, but also on how closely related the person in need is to the church. The latter category, where the church leaders mobilise a joint collection in church, is reserved for church members and leaders. The pastor referred to above legitimises the help offered to the man in hospital with him and his wife being active church members and in particular the man as being the president of the men's group. The church had an obligation to help. So one criterion of receiving help is how closely one is connected to the church, what role one plays in church life and how the pastors judge the members' behaviour, e.g. whether they live 'good Christian lives'. This is also talked about as observing someone's spiritual maturity.

Pastors who came to Kampala as refugee were assisted in a particular way and were privileged because of their status. A number of pastors I talked, who had come to Kampala recently, had been offered free accommodation. People would not accept that a 'man of God' should not live in a good house and some saw doing the 'work of God' (being a pastor) as an unselfish act that should be recognised. At the same time though, many talked about the splitting up of churches as pastors trying to make a living by founding their own church. Pastors were also rewarded for their spiritual services (as expressions of acknowledgement and gratitude), which was both a recognition of their spiritual strength and in this particular context of their willingness to assist those in need.

One pastor explained how he through his work has healed different people and that is why they have helped him and supported him financially. He has prayed for people, healed them

and now they send him money both for the church and for sending his kids to school.⁹ This return can be seen both as a way of returning something (reciprocity) and as an expression of gratitude. Another explained: “When I pray for somebody and there is a response, there are chances that I will receive money as appreciation. You pray and there is breakthrough. There is recognition that God has answered to the prayers”.¹⁰ (See also de Bruijn and van Dijk 2009, Robbins 2009). These expressions of gratitude with gifts are well-known practices in religious settings. It took, however, a particular shape in a displacement context, as it was also a way for pastors to make a living, and hence they were more often at the receiving end (receivers of gifts and help) than in contexts with more wealth. This also implied that God’s blessing were not merely understood as expressed in wealth (as in the prosperity gospel), but more in their dedication and compassion towards displaced people.

When people requested more substantial assistance, for instance in the form of money, the church leadership assessed the sincerity of the person requesting and they would pray in order to discern whether the request was approved by God. They assessed the behaviour of those who came and solicited assistance according to criteria such as: Are they true Christians? Do they have God in their hearts? They look at the identity of people and hesitate to help if ‘what he is saying is not what he is’ (*ce qu’il est en train de dire ce n’est pas ce qu’il est*), which refers to the question of sincerity. People are thought of as sincere if they work with love (*travailler dans l’amour*) (interview church treasurer, 20 January 2012).

Pastors and church leaders invoke the Holy Spirit when making decisions in church. Before electing new members to church departments the pastors and elders pray and ask God for

⁹ Interview, Kampala, 16 January 2012.

¹⁰ Interview, Kampala, 31 January 2012.

guidance. God reveals his advices and they accept: “As we work with the Spirit of God we accept what the Holy Spirit communicates.”¹¹.

By perceiving the assistance as coming from God and by linking the decision-making process to prophesising, they delegate decision-making and regulation to another world, which is another sphere of power. This also has a significance with regard to refusal of assistance as it can be explained as the lack of God’s will and hence as a legitimate act. A church treasurer explained that when they received a request of money, they would pray for one or two days, either together in church or in their respective houses. If the Holy Spirit gives a sign of confirmation, they give what they have. But if it is not seen as being within the will of God, the Holy Spirit will reveal it and they refuse to give. Then they would give advices, but would not give money. There are certain persons among the church staff who had a special gift, which permits them to give/transmit the response of the Holy Spirit directly so they do not first have to pray for several days. She explained:

‘First, we discern if the Holy Spirit directs him in his heart...We sit down and someone has given a demand...We discuss, we look at our funds and well we discuss that if the Holy Ghost convinces us that we can do something and if we have seen that there is something in the coffer, we can give it. Me personally I cannot decide or the missionary or someone. But all of us together. The staff, if the Holy Ghost confirms, and if there is [money]. If there is nothing we give advices (*conseils de fortification*) or prayers’. (Interview church treasurer, 20 January 2012)

¹¹ Interview with pastor, 7 February 2012, Kampala, Uganda.

In this way the church leaders discuss and assess the needs of a given person, but they also delegate the final decision-making to the spiritual realm and in this sense de-personalizes it.

FORMALISATION AND BUREAUCRATISATION

There are attempts made by churches to formalise and bureaucratise the assistance they offered. One church (Shekinah Eagle Centre Church) had some years back tried to set up a system in which they would formalise and expand the help they could provide by creating an NGO. The process was initiated by the founding pastor of the church who had since left for Canada. In the process they created a system of file making for each refugee. Each refugee had to fill in personal information, when they had become born-again, the name of their responsible pastor, when they had entered Uganda, their refugee file number as well as the name of other churches they had frequented in Uganda. They also had to attach a photo. The aim was to create a project where the church would be able to assist church members in a more systematised way, e.g. with vocational training, starting of businesses etc. At that time the church had around 300 members.

But when the pastor left the church and the project did not receive any funding, people started leaving the church and rumours started to circulate that the church did not keep its promises and the church was hosting refugees involved in fraud. This, as well as the church moving premises three times within a year, caused many to leave the church. In 2012 the church had around 30 regular members. One pastor explained that when people see that the church is not providing material help they go and look for somewhere else. She said:

“Some could not stand the challenges. To be in Shekinah you must have a heart, which is saved, truly saved. We pass through many situations. If you

are not called by God, you will be left on the way. That is the testimony. It is the only way I can explain it. I cannot judge them. I can only say to remain here; you have to have a good heart. A heart to serve the Lord”¹²

She uses a religious language to make intelligible why people left the church and that the church had not delivered the expected services. In this way she also distinguishes between different ways of rendering services: A more bureaucratised form that entails registration, filing, documentation, and where there are better defined expectations of what to receive, and then a more informal form of rendering services, that is understood in a religious language. In this way she puts the attention back to the relation between the individual church member and God and hence also to a different layer of the reciprocal relations of exchange; people are in church to serve God and they will be rewarded by him (Lauterbach 2014a). She also outlines one of the criteria to be seen as a loyal church member that is to stay in church although the church faces challenges and by doing this one also shows to be a true faithful.¹³

So although there were attempts to systematise and regularise the forms of assistance that the churches provide it is for the most part informal and given on an ad hoc basis. This also shows how the organisation of the service provided affected the expectations people have. When services were presented and organised in a more formal way there were a different set of expectations associated with the services, and it was more difficult for the church leaders to expect loyalty based on serving God and being a good Christian.

¹² Interview pastor, 31 January 2012, Kampala.

¹³ A similar example was when a church member in the same church was going to Canada for resettlement. The head pastor was announcing it in church and said that it was not because of the UNHCR that she was resettled, but because of God and because she had been loyal to the church (field notes, February 2013).

LINKING UP WITH HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS AND LACK OF LEGITIMACY

One way in which pastors engaged with humanitarian organisations was through being representatives of the Congolese community vis-à-vis the UNHCR and the Ugandan NGO 'Interaid' that works with the UNHCR. Three pastors I talked with participated in meetings and discussed issues of concern within the Congolese community in Uganda. One was a Catholic Father and two were from one of the charismatic churches I studied. One female pastor explained that she started as a volunteer for Interaid. In 2009 she had joined a meeting, where a man who had counselled her when she first came to Uganda as a refugee, was present, and she invited him to visit her church. She showed him the church and explained how they helping refugees. After that, the church was labelled a 'local community' by the NGO and the pastor selected as a community leader. This was part of a strategy of Interaid to meet and work with the Congolese community in Kampala and to get in touch with Congolese refugees through local institutions such as churches and other associations. She then received training in *Gender Based Violence* and attended monthly meetings where she was told: "In the meeting they told us it allows us to reach out to your communities, we allow you to work with us as volunteers. If there are problems in your community you can come to us as a leader of your community. But it was without any agreement or whatever". (interview 14 February 2012). She accepted to become a volunteer as a way to help refugees in the church, as many of them were not able themselves to get the right contacts necessary for assistance. At the same time though, being selected as a community leader did not give any personal privileges:

"I can go to Interaid but as a volunteer with that status of refugee. We have the same right or we must behave the same as any other refugee, if you are sick you have to follow the line even though you are a leader you have to follow the

procedure on how to meet your doctor, how to get your drugs ... We are the same, you come and you don't have your card you will not be seen" (interview 14 Feb 2012).

The privilege being a community leader gives is that they are able to present cases from their community directly to Interaid and that enhances their status as providers and protectors within their communities.

This was, however, not without consequences. The two pastors who had been representing the Congolese refugee community in meetings with the UNHCR and Interaid were disappointed because many of the promised initiatives were not realised. In one instance Interaid had announced that they wanted to initiate vocational training of the refugee, and after one church service everyone was signing up and indicate in what area they would like to receive training. This initiative never materialised because the organisation could only offer training in their offices and the church leaders had either to send their members there or to find their own teachers. The church leaders rather wanted to create their own teaching rooms and do the training within their own auspices.

This non-realisation of activities came to question the pastors' credibility vis-à-vis their members. As a result, the pastors withdrew from participating in what they in the beginning saw as a possibility to interact with the humanitarian organisations and mediate access to help, but what turned out to be an engagement that created expectations of assistance outside of their control. This involvement disrupted the logic of exchange, and the relations of dependency that existed between church members and pastors. By failing to provide, pastors risked losing their trustworthiness vis-à-vis church members. When pastors involved

themselves in the humanitarian sector, as in this case, the expectations for providing assistance increased and thereby also the possibility of failing to provide. There was, in other words, a dilemma between being a pastor (fulfilling the will of God and one's pastoral calling) and being involved in institutional and social networks outside of the religious field that would enable one to do so. One pastor expressed the dilemma in this way: "So when people are suffering they are just waiting ... That is why I said this year I am not going to work with them. Just let me focus on God's work and God will make a way. He is God. He knows how. But dealing again with those people, I will not."¹⁴

This is a particular concern in a displacement context because there is large need for material assistance, but also a resistance towards becoming too involved in formalised development activities such as micro-credit schemes. Many refugees perceived this as a hindrance for a 'favourable' treatment of their refugee files, which in most cases included a demand for resettlement to a third country. Having received a loan within a UNHCR program, involved the risk of not being able to pay back, and having a debt was seen as a possible obstacle in relation to being selected for resettlement.

GOVERNING COMPASSION

The Congolese churches discussed in this article understand themselves as communities that are obliged to help people in need, which is part of their identity as a Christian community. At the same time, they act and engage with people in ways that reflect a humanitarian institutional

¹⁴ Interview with pastor, 14 February 2012, Kampala, Uganda.

framework and related set of norms. In this way, the churches transgress the private-public divide and this dissolves conventional understandings of service provision and charity.

Through the provision of services and a space in which people get 'seen' in a wider sense, the churches provide recognition to people in a double sense. They are recognised both as fellow Christians (and Congolese), and as refugees in a more bureaucratic sense of the term (through the creation of files for church members, through presenting their cases, through representing the Congolese refugee community vis-à-vis the UNHCR). Recognising refugees as Christians or Congolese also meant that they were offered a space to perform and engage in social relationships. Recognition in this case is reciprocal as it is part of an engagement in social relationships based in social institutions (Fraser 2000: 114). At the same time, the attempts to bureaucratised the assistance that churches offer often failed. There were various reasons for this, but one was that the expanding field in which recognition was provided (to cover both the religious and the humanitarian) meant that churches failed to provide a reciprocal form of recognition in this bigger field. The act of providing assistance in the more formalised way was interpreted by people according to different norms as compared to the assistance provided by compassion.

This observation, I would argue, questions the assertion that refugee life (and in particular refugee life in marginalised and subordinated spaces) is best understood as a form of 'bare life'. Although people refer to idioms such as 'pity' and 'spiritual maturity' (that also involves some form of loyalty) the practices of providing assistance can also be seen as new forms politics and the religious institutions as new arenas of governance that operate according to other criteria and ways of regulating access than humanitarian organisations.

As mentioned above, the services provided by churches were more accessible than services provided by other institutions. There was no need of having a file or a case number. Still, it

required being seen as a good Christian and the space to present oneself and being visible. Churches tried to duplicate humanitarian agencies and to become bureaucratised as a way to be part of the humanitarian field and provide different services, which ideally would also provide more legitimacy. At the same time, they had to distance themselves from the same organisations, because being too closely associated also meant risking or losing legitimacy or credibility in case the institutions failed to provide.

By studying how religious institutions provide and regulate assistance to refugees, I have shown that they provide both material and spiritual services, and this is a particular way of building up positions of authority. These positions draw on several sources of power and this is what distinguishes them from other non-state institutions. This has implications for how assistance is understood as well as how access is regulated.

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